

Nuggets From the Vault

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The History of Presidents on Our Coins

In 2009, the United States Mint will join the nation in celebrating the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Our 16th President was a man who, in a time of great division, remained wholly dedicated to the preservation of the Union. In 1909 he became the first American President to be featured on a circulating coin when Theodore Roosevelt and the United States Treasury Department decided to celebrate his 100th birthday by redesigning the one-cent coin.

The decision to change the design of the 1909 penny was reported in the Annual Report of the Director of the Mint without any explanation of the reasons why the Agency was abandoning more than 115 years of tradition by placing the image of a President on a circulating coin. Researchers and numismatists appear to agree that Theodore Roosevelt's earlier discussions with sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens may also have included the topic of honoring Lincoln, but the artist's death in 1907 ended the possibility of a Saint-Gaudens designed coin commemorating the birth of our 16th president.

For more than a century after the founding of our nation, American Presidents led this new Republic, with its system of self-government untested and unmatched in all the world, through a period of rapid growth and development that included massive industrial advancement, one of the most devastating civil wars in all of human history and the conquest of the skies on the sandy dunes of North Carolina. In the context of a lifetime, this first American century could accurately be described as a very active childhood.

The success or failure of what George Washington himself dubbed "this great experiment" depended on our ability to steer clear of the obstacles and pitfalls which, over time, may have contributed to the downfall and ultimate collapse of other civilizations once deemed great.

Like our representative government itself, the images chosen to appear on American coins were another statement of difference between the system against which American colonists rebelled and the government for which American citizens would work. England was just one in a long line of civilizations that routinely paid tribute to their current sovereign by engraving his or her portrait onto the coins of the realm. That tradition extended back to the very beginning of coins as medium of exchange. Emperors and kings have always been so honored.

It is reasonable to suggest that it was a belief in unrestricted opportunity as an American birthright that helped guide the Congress in the creation of many of the federal institutions charged with governing the new nation, including the United States Mint, whose chief purpose was the coining of American money. With respect to the images

that would be featured on American coins, the Mint Act of 1792 specifically states “...there shall be the following devices and legends, namely: Upon one side of each of the said coins there shall be an impression emblematic of liberty...” The elected representatives knew that they could more effectively strengthen the democratic principles on which the nation was formed by stamping coins with designs of Liberty rather than an image of President George Washington.

In executing the blueprint of our nation’s democracy, one of the masterstrokes of the founding fathers was their understanding of the universal appeal and importance of ideals to the average citizen. In a time of obvious inequality and institutionalized slavery Thomas Jefferson’s simple declaration that “all men are created equal” was more likely meant to convey an understanding by our leaders that this new government was not a constitutional monarchy; that a man from humble beginnings could rise to hold the nation’s highest office, a story made real by the emergence of a self-educated lawyer from the American heartland, Abraham Lincoln.

As decades passed and the American experiment continued to gain legitimacy through its continued growth and prosperity, honoring the vision of the nation’s founders and great leaders became an important and, some would say, necessary public discussion. More so, it was already being done. From great portraits and statues honoring battlefield accomplishments to important volumes of the nation’s early history, men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant were being written and molded into the fabric and folklore of the country.

Interestingly, when President Theodore Roosevelt began to discuss invigorating American coin design with the world-renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, it was Roosevelt’s desire to bring elements of classically influenced sculpture that eventually resulted in both Saint-Gaudens’ Liberty, and Adolph A. Weinman’s Walking Liberty. Each of these designs was used for a time on circulating coins, yet both would be retired before the 20th Century was half over.

Although the collaboration with Saint-Gaudens resulted in some of the country’s most beloved numismatic designs, the gifted sculptor was often frustrated by what he believed to be excessive and unnecessary bureaucracy in his dealings with both the Treasury Department and the United States Mint. This can be seen in letters between the Mint Director and the artist dated 1894, when Saint-Gaudens was working to design a medal for the Chicago World’s Fair. Saint-Gaudens’ first priority was sculpture, and he struggled with concerns dealing with the coinability of his designs.

Unlike Saint-Gaudens, the sculptor Victor David Brenner was dedicated to furthering the ties between sculpture artists and numismatics. Towards the end of the 19th Century he served as an instructor at New York’s School for Die-Cutting and was listed as member #434 in the American Numismatic Association. His 1907 plaque of Abraham Lincoln caught the eye of President Roosevelt, who wished to see it used on American circulating coinage.

It remains unclear as to precisely how and when the decision was reached to use Brenner's portrait of Lincoln on the one-cent coin. *The Numismatist* reported in its January 1909 issue, that "It is probable that the half dollar piece will be selected as the principal coin to bear the Lincoln head..." United States Mint Director Frank Leach reportedly dismissed the story as premature. Following the revelation that Lincoln would be featured on a new cent, subsequent issues of the magazine reported on developments surrounding the new coin and in July 1909, reported that more than 22 million new Lincoln cents had been coined in Philadelphia. They were officially released on August 2, 1909.

The public response to the new one-cent coin was, predictably, mixed. While many Americans embraced the new design, there was no doubt a significant number who opposed the change. Considering that a large number of Civil War veterans were still living in 1909, those who had fought for and wore the uniform of the Confederacy may have found it difficult, if not impossible, to carry the image of Lincoln, the man responsible for vanquishing their secessionist dreams, in their pockets.

It would be twenty-three more years before another former President would join Lincoln on the face of America's circulating coins. In preparation for the 1932 bicentennial of George Washington's birth, the Treasury Department and the George Washington Bicentennial Commission suggested a competition to honor our first President on both a coin and a medal.

Official rules were released to the public early in 1932, and participants were instructed to model their designs on the bust of Washington created from a life mask by noted sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon.

The work of accomplished sculptor Laura Gardin Fraser, whose husband James had designed the Indian Head (sometimes called the Buffalo) nickel, was chosen for the Washington Bicentennial Medal. For the Washington circulating coin, Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon chose the work of New York sculptor John Flanagan, whose portrait of Washington in profile still graces the obverse of the quarter today. Laura Fraser also created a design for the circulating coin, but it was not chosen by Treasury officials for that purpose. The design she submitted for the coin can be found on the United States Mint's commemorative 1999 George Washington Death Bicentennial Gold Five-Dollar Coin.

The practice of placing American Presidents on circulating coins continued in 1938, when the United States Treasury Department announced a public competition to solicit designs to replace those featured on the obverse and reverse of the 5-cent coin that year. The rules of the competition specified that the new nickel's obverse must feature an authentic portrait of Thomas Jefferson and that the coin's reverse would recognize Monticello, his historic home near Charlottesville, Virginia.

After 390 sets of models were submitted by some of the country's most accomplished artists and sculptors, the designs of German-American sculptor Felix Schlag were

selected, earning him the advertised \$1,000 prize in April 1938. The portrait he submitted, the familiar left-facing profile of Thomas Jefferson, was based on a bust by sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon and featured Jefferson dressed in a period coat and wearing a traditional 18th Century peruke wig.

The Jefferson nickel remained unchanged for 66 years, until the release of the first coins of the Westward Journey Nickel Series™ in 2004.

As the 1930s came to a close, Presidential portraits had replaced traditional Liberty-themed images on three of the Nation's five most common coins; the penny, the nickel and the quarter. When American soldiers went overseas in the early 1940s, they still carried with them half-dollars that featured Walking Liberty, and ten-cent pieces that bore a bust of Liberty in a winged cap, often referred to as the Mercury dime. Both of these classic designs are the work of Saint-Gaudens' protégé, Adolph A. Weinman.

Shortly after the end of WWII, one of these designs would be retired to honor the man who led the United States longer than any other, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Elected to an unprecedented four terms as America's Commander in Chief, FDR had battled polio since contracting the disease in 1921, a fight that ultimately claimed victory over the great man in April, 1945. Two factors that contributed to Roosevelt being honored on the ten-cent coin were his strong support for the March of Dimes and the fact that the winged Liberty design had been in use since 1916, a period of 29 years, thus obviating the need for new legislation to make the change.

Liberty, as a design, was removed from the obverse of the last circulating coin in 1948, though for the first time the place of honor did not pass to a former American President. The release of the 1948 Benjamin Franklin half-dollar did not coincide with a noteworthy anniversary, but was rather a project driven by the desire of long-time Director of the United States Mint Nellie Tayloe Ross to see two iconic American images – Benjamin Franklin and the Liberty Bell – so honored. Again, the long run enjoyed by Weinman's Walking Liberty, 31 years, from 1916 to 1947, meant that a change could be made without requiring special legislation from the Congress.

Following the release of the Franklin half-dollars, the country enjoyed a period of relative calm, at least as far as circulating coin design was concerned. The only change made to circulating coinage in the 1950s was to the reverse of the Lincoln cent, as an image of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC replaced the 50-year old "Wheat Ears" design.

Everything changed on November 22, 1963, when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on the streets of Dallas, Texas. A decision was quickly made to honor the nation's fallen leader by replacing the image of Franklin on the United States half-dollar. The change didn't have to come from Congress; President Lyndon Johnson issued an Executive Order directing the United States Mint to make the change.

The process begun in 1909 was complete in 1964, when American Presidents were featured on every regular issue circulating coin; Abraham Lincoln on the cent, Thomas

Jefferson on the nickel, Franklin Roosevelt on the dime, George Washington on the quarter-dollar and John F. Kennedy on the half-dollar.

One final addition to this group would be made in 1971, when United States Mint Director Eva Adams presented Richard Nixon and Mamie Eisenhower with the first new one dollar coins issued by the United States since the Coinage Act of 1965 ordered a five-year moratorium on the coins. The issuance of the Eisenhower dollar followed the tradition established by the Roosevelt dime and Kennedy half-dollar, that of honoring the life and work of recently deceased Presidents on circulating coins.

In 2005, President George W. Bush signed the Presidential \$1 Coin Act, ensuring an extension of this great tradition by at least 10 years – 10 very busy years that will see the striking and release of four new dollar coins each year, honoring the service of all of the United States Presidents in the order in which they served.

While our country moved steadily towards honoring presidents on the face of our coins, our connection to *Liberty*, one of just two images named by the founders for use on our earliest coins, remains as strong as ever. The image each of these new Presidential \$1 Coins will share is a rendition of sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi's *Lady Liberty*, who has stood as a welcoming beacon of freedom in New York harbor for more than 125 years. She is the perfect symbol to complement a series of newly-created Presidential portraits, and her inspiring presence brings full circle the story of great American coin design.